



Rebecca Haag of Island Grown Initiative and James Anthony of Martha's Vineyard Bank. *Ray Ewing*

Island Food Pantry Receives \$1 Million Grant from MV Bank

Ethan Genter *Thursday, October 12, 2023 - 4:40pm*

Efforts to start a new, permanent home for the Island Food Pantry got a major boost this week when the Martha's Vineyard Bank Charitable Foundation announced it was giving Island Grown Initiative \$1 million for the project.

The grant will help pay for the new food distribution center on Dukes County avenue in Oak Bluffs, and represents about 40 per cent of the estimated \$2.5 million cost to get the pantry up and running.

"This is a huge step forward," said IGI executive director Rebecca Haag at an event Wednesday at the Martha's Vineyard Museum to celebrate the grant to her nonprofit, as well as several others.

The bank foundation announced about \$1.1 million in total grants Wednesday, including nearly 30 micro-grants to local teachers.

Island Grown Initiative (IGI) has been run

ning the food pantry for three years and acquired the former warehouse in Oak Bluffs in May for \$1.72 million. The purchase capped a five-year search for a permanent home for the food distribution operation.

The pantry serves about 4,200 people annually, which equals about 20 per cent of the Island's year-round population, Ms. Haag said.

"This Island is an island of plenty," Ms. Haag said.

"It's hard to imagine that some of our neighbors struggle, but we serve professional people: workers, landscapers, nurses, people who just can't make ends meet."

Since 2021, the food pantry has been operating out of the front room of the Portuguese American Club on nearby Vineyard avenue. But the space has never been able to accommodate more than a single week's worth of groceries at a time, creating concerns about the lack of food stores.

During Wednesday's event, bank president James Anthony said getting the permanent location has been a longstanding priority for the bank's foundation.

"That objective is something that I know our board has discussed since the day I arrived," he said. "The need for a centralized place to distribute charitable food, for those in need of it, has been something that's been long running."

Ms. Haag said she hoped that her organization could use the foundation's grant as a challenge to donors to help finish paying off the new property.

"We had to take a loan on the building, have the building secured and have what we need to do the renovations," she said.

Island Grown Initiative's lease with the P.A. Club ends in the first quarter of next year, according to Ms. Haag, and the goal is to open the new pantry next spring. Upgrades would be a new roof, improvements to electrical infrastructure in order to handle refrigerators and freezers, new insulation, and a handicap accessible bathroom.

The project went before the Martha's Vineyard Commission last week, its first hurdle in the local permitting process. Commissioners expressed concern about the food pantry's impact on traffic and parking in its proposed new neighborhood, a mix of homes and businesses including Tony's Market and Bombay Indian Cuisine.



Proposed new Food Pantry location on Dukes County avenue in Oak Bluffs. — *Jeanna Shepard*

“That’s a pretty competitive spot [for parking],” commissioner Greg Martino said.

The future pantry has ample off-street parking and a plan for operation that no longer relies on the current model of first-come-first-served shopping in a limited window of time, according to Ms. Haag.

Most food pantry clients will select their groceries in advance with a simple phone-based application that allows them to set a specific pick-up time.

In addition to providing more room for operations, the new location — which Island Grown is calling the Island Food Center — has enough food storage space to sustain the pantry over periods of stormy weather or other emergencies.

“If that boat doesn’t run on Tuesday, we have people waiting in line for food,” Ms. Haag said at Wednesday’s charitable event.

At the MVC hearing, owners of nearby properties spoke in favor of the Island Grown plan, saying the organization had walked them through the location and answered all their concerns about how the pantry will operate.

“Somebody’s helping people, and it’s not about greed and more-more-more. I welcome them to the neighborhood,” said residential and commercial landlord Candace Nichols.

Commissioners asked Island Grown Initiative to submit a stormwater study. The hearing will continue Nov. 2.

Louisa Hufstader contributed to this report.

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